



COURTESY GRAPHIC

Former WASP shares her World War II experiences

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TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. — She helped set the standard for future female Airmen, contributed to the Air Force becoming a separate service, and she and her friends put themselves in harm’s way far from home to serve the Army in an experimental flying program at their own expense, all in the name of patriotism.

“At that time, everyone was doing something and I felt obligated to help with the war,” said Deanie Parrish, Women Airforce Service Pilots veteran. “For me, I felt flying was my way to contribute.”

A native of Avon Park, Fla., Ms. Parrish quickly became famous in her small town for being the only female pilot during her teenage years, she said. Her town was even more surprised when she joined the Army at 21, the required age to apply for the service.

“I wanted to show all those good-looking male cadet instructors that girls could fly just as good as the boys,” Ms. Parrish said. “Besides, the only other things to do for fun in Avon Park was go to the movies.”

Her only challenge was saving enough money from her earnings as a bank employee to pay for her

pilot’s license and the travel fare to Avenger Field, Texas.

In 1942, when there was a severe shortage of male pilots, Jacqueline Cochran, America’s foremost female pilot, convinced General Hap “Hap” Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, that she could bring together a corps of seasoned women pilots and train them the “Army Way” so they could replace the male pilots being sent overseas, according to WASP records online.

When they heard the call, 25,000 young women from all over America responded, but the requirements for acceptance of females were tougher than of men. Only 1,830 of the women volunteers were eventually accepted. In 1945 the U.S. Army transformed Avenger Field, into the only military flying school for women.

“Our training program was the same as the one male cadets were going through all over the country: ground school, flight school, cross-country flying, night flying, instrument flying, daily calisthenics, flying link trainers, and constantly marching — the Army way,” Ms. Parrish said. “At the end of each phase of flight training we were given Army check rides by Army Air Force officers. Those who didn’t pass washed out, packed their bags, and paid their way back home.”

During training, Ms. Parrish for the first time met other women who loved flying like her. Even with her experience as a volunteer for the Civil Air Patrol, she didn’t run into any other female pilots in Florida.

“Back home, girls grew up expecting to be wives, mothers and maybe a nurse or a teacher, but they were not expected to have a professional career and flying was far out there,” said Ms. Parrish, who still bonds with other WASP through her volunteer efforts to preserve their history.

“I wanted to do something no one had done, pave the way and forever change the way of aviation. Someone had to do it, we had to start somewhere,” she said.

After earning her WASP wings, Ms. Parrish was assigned as an engineering test pilot at Greenville, Miss. After the red-lined planes were fixed, she and other WASP test pilots flew them to see if they were air worthy for the cadets to fly.

“WASP lived in the officers’ quarters and took their orders from [Army] Air Force commanders,” Ms. Parrish said. “WASP flew every type of aircraft the Air Force owned — trainers, fighters, bombers — and they flew them in all kinds of weather and under all kinds of adverse conditions. They ferried personnel and hauled cargo; they delivered aircraft to points of embarkation; and they test-flew new

planes, old planes, rebuilt planes and some planes that male pilots refused to fly. And they delivered many old war-weary airplanes to the junkyards and scrap heaps of America.”

Her most memorable assignment was at Tyndall for two reasons. First, as a tow-target pilot, she had the ability to master her flying skill in a twin-engine aircraft most pilots felt was too dangerous to fly, the B-26 Martin Marauder, and it became her favorite plane to fly. It had short wings and appeared to have no support, hence the reason the aircraft was nicknamed “Widow Maker,” “The Flying Coffin,” and others.

“I towed targets for ground-to-air anti-aircraft gunnery practice, and targets for air-to-air gunnery practice — always for gunnery trainees firing live ammunition,” Ms. Parrish said.

“Needless to say, these were ‘green gunners’ which means they were learning and some couldn’t shoot as straight as others. The plane had the worst training record but was the best in combat,” she said.

The second reason Tyndall was so memorable for her became a lifelong treasure. It was a routine training mission that would result in her base commander walking her down the chapel aisle.

“During a target-towing mission, 1st Lt. Bill Parrish instructed his gunners to aim close so he could meet the ‘cute girl pilot’ towing the target,” she said. “They came so close, they put a few holes in my tail. When I landed, I started to give Bill a piece of my mind, but instead, I fell in love and we were married for 47 years.”

In less than two years, WASP flew more than 60 million miles for their country before they were disbanded in 1944, according to a WASP Web site. They flew every kind of non-combat mission the Air Force had and 39 of them made the ultimate sacrifice.

“At hundreds of air bases all over America, the WASP hung up their Army parachutes for the last time, packed their bags and paid their way back home,” said Ms. Parrish, who never even held rank. “There were no GI benefits, no fringe benefits, and



COURTESY PHOTO

Deanie Parish visits the aircraft she used to pilot.

no dress parades — just the satisfaction of knowing they had done their duty and they had completed their mission.”

That same motivation and determination is still in the WASP. By meeting one of them, the feeling can get contagious, said Nancy, Ms. Parrish’s daughter, who stopped working to help her mother build a WASP museum and plan a memorial for their World War II service in the area where they trained.

“They make you believe you can do anything,” said Nancy Parrish, who has attended WASP conferences and conducted interviews with her mother. “That message and the lives they led inspire me.”

“Looking back, I see it was risky,” Ms. Parrish said. “But at the time, you just assumed everyone takes risks and you had faith.”

While she and other WASP were training they couldn’t even write home about their experiences because the program was experimental and revealing any information on it could jeopardize it.

Ms. Parrish’s parents understood the need to be patriotic and provided support, just like many others from the “greatest generation.”

Wing Women’s History Events

Retreat ceremony

— 4:30 p.m. on Wednesday at wing headquarters

Come observe the Cultural Observance Committee perform retreat.

Ladies Night

— 4 p.m. on March 30 at The Landing

The Landing is hosting a Ladies Night Crud Tournament with drink special.

History Fair

— All day on March 30-31 at the base exchange

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service is holding a history fair for the base populace.